

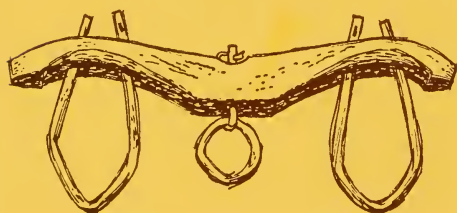
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Lincoln and Burns

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A. G. McKNIGHT

Royal Chief . . . Order of Scottish Clans

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In the Abraham Lincoln Quarterly of September 1942, Paul M. Angle in his article on Logan Hay, who was long President of the Abraham Lincoln Association, credits Mr. Hay with locating the original volume of Howells' Life of Lincoln, with Lincoln's own notes and corrections.

Mr. Angle says that "This is probably the most important Lincoln 'find' in many years."

To one who is deeply interested in getting indisputable evidence as to the influence of Robert Burns on Abraham Lincoln, the location of this book certainly was a most important "find."

It appears that in 1860 William Dean Howells, then a young newspaper man, prepared a biography of Abraham Lincoln for campaign purposes.

Lincoln apparently did not authorize publication of this volume, but when Samuel C. Parks, who was a friend of long standing and who was then practicing law at Lincoln, Illinois, asked him to correct the volume of this biography which he had purchased, Lincoln did so.

The note by Parks found in the fly leaf of the corrected volume says:

"This life of Lincoln was corrected by him for me, at my request, in the summer of 1860, by notes in his own handwriting in pencil on the margin.

"It is to be preserved by my children as a lasting memorial of that great man and of his friendship for me."

(signed) SAMUEL C. PARKS.

Kansas City, Mo.

May 22, 1901

There were ninety-four pages in this biography and Lincoln read it with such care that his corrections, written in pencil, appear on fourteen of these pages.

The entire book, with Lincoln's corrections, has been photostated and published by the Abraham Lincoln Association and in the Editor's preface it is truly stated.

"The book becomes a valuable historical source and enables us to speak with more assurance on several hitherto uncertain points in the pre-presidential period of Lincoln's life."

Some of the corrections are most interesting. For instance on page 41 of the volume it was stated

"It is supposed that it was at New Salem that Lincoln while a clerk in Offut's store, first saw Stephen A. Douglas, and probably the acquaintance was renewed during Lincoln's proprietorship of the store which he afterward bought in the same place."

Lincoln marked this paragraph with a star and on the margin wrote

"Wholly wrong. I first saw Douglas at Vandalia, Dec., 1834. I never saw him at New Salem."

And again on page 47 it was said

"The Illinois legislature then held its sessions in Vandalia and Lincoln used to perform his journeys between New Salem and the seat of government on foot, though the remaining eight of the Long Nine traveled on horseback"

Again we find a star and a marginal note by Lincoln as follows:

"No harm if true, but in fact, not true."

Thus it would seem that what he left uncorrected in this volume can be accepted as pretty authentic.

On page 31 we find this uncorrected paragraph:

"When practicing law, before his election to Congress, a copy of Burns was his inseparable companion on the circuit, and this he perused so constantly that it is said he has now by heart every line of this favorite poet."

After all Lincoln knew more about his own familiarity with Burns than any of the rest of us, including his numerous later biographers, and if it were error to say that "a copy of Burns was his inseparable companion" he had a fine chance to correct this bald statement of fact and he did not do so.

When Milton Hay, who was a clerk in Lincoln's office, was interviewed by "Gath," a New York newspaper man, in Saratoga, New York, in 1883, "Gath" reports him in the Daily Illinois Journal of Sept. 1, 1883, as saying in answer to the question, "What author did Lincoln read most?" "Burns was his fav-

orite author for many years. I have never seen that mentioned anywhere."

Apparently Mr. Hay had not read Howells' *Life of Lincoln* or else the significance of the paragraph which we have quoted from that biography had escaped him.

Mr. Hay went on to say in this interview:

"Mr. Lincoln did not read many books, but those he fancied took strong possession of him. He could quote Burns by the hour. I have been with him in that little office and heard him recite with the greatest admiration and zest Burns' Ballads and quaint things. That was one of the sources of his wisdom and wit.

"As years passed on he did not quote Burns as much. He had then taken up Shakespeare and became deeply interested in him and yet I fancy that a great deal of Abraham Lincoln is bottomed on Robert Burns and William Shakespeare. Sometimes I think I can see the traces of both men in his writings.

"When you consider the bringing up of Lincoln, what a writer he was! The Anglo Saxon seemed to come to him as if he had been taught by some Anglo Saxon mother in her own land, centuries ago.

"The poets undoubtedly had their influence on Lincoln's style and probably on his mind."

This is a significant statement by one who knew Lincoln well in the earlier years of his life in Springfield, and it is interesting to turn from him to one who knew him when the shadows of his life were falling towards the east.

Noah P. Brooks was an Illinois newspaper man who was very close to Lincoln while he was President, and in fact was scheduled to be appointed his Secretary in May 1865.

In the preface to his biography of Lincoln he says:

"It was my good fortune to know Lincoln with some degree of intimacy, our acquaintance beginning with the Fremont campaign of 1856, when I was a resident of Illinois and continuing through the Lincoln-Douglas canvass two years later.

"That relation became more intimate and confidential when, in 1862, I met Lincoln in Washington and saw him almost daily until his tragical death.

"This preliminary egotism may be pardoned by way of explanation of the fact that many things relating to his early life, herein set forth, were derived from his own lips, often during hours of secluded companionship."

On page 30 of his *Life of Lincoln*, Mr. Brooks says, referring to the early days in Indiana, when young Lincoln hung over James Fenimore Cooper's *Leather Stocking Tales* "with rapturous delight,"

"Another book borrowed from one of the few and distant neighbors, was Burns' *Poems*, a thick and chunky volume, as he afterwards described it, bound in leather and printed in small type. This book he kept long enough to commit to memory almost all of its contents. And ever after, to the day of his death, some of the familiar lines of the Scottish poet were as ready on his lips as those of Shakespeare, the only poet who was, in Lincoln's opinion, greater than Robert Burns."

These statements by Brooks do not sound like the product of imagination but rather the reporting of intimate conversations with the one man on earth who could give the true facts.

If Lincoln had not described the Burns volume as a "thick, chunky volume, bound in leather and printed in small type," it is hardly possible that Brooks, out of his own head, would have so described it.

This volume of Burns, and there were many in that period that answer to that description, must have made a very distinct and permanent impression on Lincoln's mind.

I have been able to secure positive evidence as to the existence of such a volume in the family of James Gentry, one of Lincoln's neighbors and the brother of the Gentry who went to New Orleans with Lincoln. Mrs. Ada Gentry Rhoades, a granddaughter of James Gentry, in a letter written to Mrs. Bess V. Ehrmann, on November 23, 1942, tells of her grandfather reading Burns' poems from a book which she describes as follows:

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"A medium sized book. The covering was dark brown leather. The leather looked as though it was pigskin. I always felt I could see traces of the pig's bristles thru the covering."

According to Mrs. Rhoades it was one of her grandfather's favorite recreations to read to the family from this Burns volume. As Lincoln worked for the Gentrys and was often in their home during his 14 years in Indiana, it is hardly possible that he did not read this book.

The statement by Brooks that Lincoln quoted Burns "to the day of his death" is certainly a statement of fact and, of course, is entirely corroborative of the testimony of Milton Hay as to Lincoln's practice in his earlier years.

Isaac N. Arnold in his 1869 Edition of his Life of Lincoln supports Brooks' claim that it was in his early years in Indiana Lincoln became acquainted with the poems of Burns.

On page 13 of that Edition he says:

"He was able to obtain in addition to the Bible, Aesop's Fables, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, Weems' Life of Washington, and Burns' Poems. These constituted nearly all he read *before he reached the age of nineteen.*"

And again in the Lincoln Memorial Album, page 33, Arnold is quoted as saying:

"Among the stray volumes which he found in the possession of the illiterate families by which he was surrounded, were Aesop's Fables, Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, a life of Washington, the poems of Burns and the Bible."

Arnold was a very close friend of Lincoln and apparently knew most intimately of Lincoln's knowledge of Burns. He knew of the speech made by Lincoln at the 100th anniversary Burns' festival held at Springfield on Jan. 25, 1859, and has given us more details than any one else about Lincoln's appearance on that occasion. On page 59 of his 1869 edition he says:

"Shakespeare was his favorite poet, Burns stood next. I knew of a speech of his at a Burns' festival in which he spoke at length of Burns' poems illustrating what he said by many quotations, showing perfect familiarity with and full appreciation of the peasant poet of Scotland."

Samuel C. Parks, whose copy of Howells' biography Lincoln corrected, verified the statement made in that biography as to Lincoln's familiarity with the poems of Burns.

In an address given by Mr. Parks in January 1894, before the Oratorical Association of Michigan University he said, referring to Lincoln's early youth and to his fondness for writing doggerel:

"But this boyish taste for doggerel passed away and was succeeded by a higher one for Shakespeare and Burns. The latter he was accustomed to carry around with him on the circuit, and committed much of it to memory. And no wonder. The man who said his heart was buried in the grave of his first love, Ann Rutledge, would naturally love the poet who sang with such mournful beauty over the grave of Highland Mary.

"The man who hated slavery and sympathized with the oppressed and weary-laden everywhere would feel in his inmost heart every verse of that matchless poem, 'Man was made to mourn.'

"The great central question of the poem has been asked in some form by oppressed humanity for thousands of years. It was the question five thousand years ago upon the banks of the Nile by the hundreds of thousands of slaves who built the Pyramids at the command of Egyptian tyrants. It was the question upon the shores of the Tigris and Euphrates by the miserable victims of unrequited toil, who erected those vast monuments of despotism in Nineveh and Babylon. It was the question of the poor and ignorant victims of the oppressions and cruelties of the robber barons and the petty despots of the Middle Ages. That question has been asked for centuries by millions of the subjects of the great despotisms of modern Europe. It was asked by the black man in America during his three hundred years of bondage, and it is now being asked all over the civilized world by men of all colors and all races who are suffering from poverty and want, from

political despotism, from financial oppression, and from corporate greed. The question as put by the unrivaled minstrel of Scotland is the cry of oppressed and downtrodden humanity from the dawn of history to the present hour.

"If I'm designed yon lordling's slave
By nature's law designed,
Why was an independent wish
E'er planted in my mind?
If not, why am I subject to
His cruelty and scorn?
And why has man the will and power
To make his brother mourn?"

"No public man ever lived who was better fitted to understand and to answer this question than Abraham Lincoln. None of the great rulers of the world believed more entirely in the equal rights of our common humanity as a matter of principle, or were more devoted to their vindication in practice. He has been justly called the great commoner of the world, and when the fullness of time had come and when he could do so constitutionally as a necessary war measure, he answered one phase of the great question by emancipating nearly 4,000,000 slaves."

Another of those who knew Lincoln intimately, Harry B. Rankin, has given us additional evidence of Lincoln's devotion to Burns.

Mr. Rankin worked in Lincoln & Herndon's law office in 1856. His father was the Sheriff of Menard County and Rankin as a boy used to run errands for the lawyers during court terms in that county and had thus come in contact many times with Lincoln.

In his "Personal recollections of Abraham Lincoln" (Page 125) Rankin says:

"It was exceptional for Lincoln to read aloud in the office anything but a newspaper extract. Only books that had a peculiar and unusual charm for him in their ideas or form of expression tempted him to read aloud when in his office—and this only when the office family were alone present.

"It was quite usual and expected by us at such times when he became absorbed in reading some favorite author, as Burns' Poems, or one of Shakespeare's plays for him to begin reading aloud, if some choice character or principle had appealed to him; and he would then continue on to the end of the act and sometimes to the end of the play or poem."

Rankin calls our attention at page 141 of this volume to the difference in literary tastes of the two partners, Lincoln and Herndon, in these words:

"The poetry of Bailey's Festus, the writings of Carlyle and Immanuel Kant charmed Herndon, while it was Whitman, Burns and Shakespeare of whom Lincoln became more and more fond. The authors mentioned indicate the wide difference in their literary tastes."

And again in his "Intimate Sketches of Lincoln" Rankin on page 132 gives us a real intimate glimpse of Lincoln's admiration for the character of Burns. This is what he says:

"Lincoln was a frequent reader and sincere admirer of Burns, both of his poetry and his familiar love and expression of the life and homely thoughts of common people.

"Illustrating this it may not be too far from the trend of this sketch to repeat here an incident in Burns' life that I heard Lincoln tell several times and with decided approval.

"It was of Burns when he was riding on horseback near Edinburgh with a party of young bloods of the aristocratic city set. They met a Scotch farmer who was dressed in the quaint coarse garb of a laborer. Burns stopped to shake hands and turned to chat with the plain Scot. The young roysterers rode on leaving Burns with his plainly dressed and crude appearing companion.

"A few minutes later Burns came cantering up to join the party. One of them, in a sneering manner reflected on Burns for his familiarity

with the old man so crude in dress and manner. To this Burns made the caustic reply:

"I was not speaking to the suit of hoden gray, sponce bonnet, and wooden shoes, but to the man sir, the man that stood in them, who for true manly worth and character would weigh down you and me, and a dozen more such any day."

I do not know of the authenticity of this story but it has been told to me in varying forms many times. One report of Burns' answer to the criticism of his friends about his greeting so cordially one who was poorly clad, was that he said, "I was talkin tae the man, no his claes." (clothes)

Whether this story is apocryphal or not it certainly aptly illustrates the attitude towards the lowly, of both of these great souls.

In F. B. Carpenter's "Six Months in the White House," Page 114, he confirmed our notion that Lincoln and Burns had the same essential attitude. He related an incident in Lincoln's everyday life in the White House and then wrote:

"In such acts as this showing that he neither forgot nor was ashamed of his humble origin, the late President exhibited his true nobility of character. He was a perfect illustration of *his favorite poet's* words:

"The rank is but the guinea stamp,
The man's the gold for a' that"

Emmanuel Hertz in his brochure "Abraham Lincoln—His Favorite Poems and Poets says (page 31):

"Lincoln certainly knew Shakespeare and Burns as few of his contemporaries knew these two great English poets."

He went on to say, speaking of Lincoln's war days (page 47):

"He had to have some rest and he found it—in the few well worn books; Burns, Shakespeare, and especially the Bible, the book he knew better than any other, a book full of poetry—Job, the Song of Songs, and the Psalms. No finer poetry can be found anywhere and with this collection of divine poetry he dwelt at all times, from his youth to his last day on earth; hence his love for the poetry of Shakespeare, and of Burns' 'A man's a man for a' that' which is said to have inspired the one act by which he will be remembered through the ages—The Emancipation Proclamation, as well as the love of the poor, the lowly, the distressed, the condemned and the abandoned."

Hertz also quotes Ariadne Gilbert as saying (Page 16):

"As for Burns, he and Lincoln were mates in a great many ways; one born in a clay hut, the other in a log-cabin; one schooled in the Scotch hills, the other in the forest and prairie, those schools of trees, and starlight, and wide spaces, teaching that men are brothers to the creatures of the grass. Surely Lincoln and Burns were kindred spirits in their tenderness.

"There was the Scotch plowman, sorry to uproot the mountain daisy and scatter the field mouse's nest; sorry to scare the waterfowl from the dimpling loch; heart-wounded when he saw the wounded hare, and waking at night in the whirling snowstorm, thinking of the 'ourie cattle and silly sheep' and the 'wee helpless cowering birds.'

"There was the Illinois woodsman with his hundreds of unrecorded sympathies, for he left no poems to tell them. No one will ever know how often he scorned a chance to rob a nest or bring down with his gun a feathered mate, or how often, instead of the thought of cruelty, there fluttered over his rough face a look of tender understanding which always came when wood-creatures or men were at his mercy."

Abraham Lincoln must often have repeated and thoroughly approved that marvelous verse from the "Address to the Mouse":

"I'm truly sorry man's dominion
Has broken *nature's social union*
And justifies the ill opinion
That makes thee startle
At me, thy poor *earth-born companion*
And fellow mortal."

In fact there is so much of the sound common sense of Burns to be found in Lincoln's attitude toward religion, politics and the world generally that it is difficult to try to estimate the influence which Burns had in molding Lincoln's whole mental processes.

We sometimes forget, too, that in this "thick chunky volume" of Burns, which Lincoln first read, many of Burns' letters appeared, and that these letters contain some of the wisest observations on men and their manners that can be read anywhere.

It should be remembered that the leading scholar of Burns' day in Scotland, Principal Robertson of Edinburgh University, said that "Burns' poetry surprised him much" but "his *prose* still more.

We cannot doubt that in those early pioneer days, when books were so rare, Lincoln read with avidity everything there was between the covers of that "chunky" Burns volume.

When he read, in one of Burns' letters:

"We wrap ourselves in the cloak of our own better fortune or turn away our eyes lest the wants and woes of our brother mortals should disturb the selfish apathy of our souls."

he undoubtedly agreed with that indictment of mankind, and concluded, that as far as he was concerned he would not be as calloused as Burns declared mankind generally to be.

Mr. Parks rightly has mentioned "Man was made to Mourn," being a poem which Lincoln loved and which had a profound influence upon him, but, I am sure that another poem, less known, equally impressed him.

Imagine young Lincoln in the loneliness of an Indiana winter reading this:

"Blow, blow, ye winds with heavier gust!
And freeze, thou bitter-biting frost!
Decend, ye chilly, smothering snows!
Not all your rage, as now united, shows
More hard unkindness, unrelenting
Vengeful malice unrepenting,
Than heaven-illumined man on brother man bestows!
See stern Oppression's iron grip,
Or mad ambition's gory hand,
Sending, like bloodhounds from the slip,
Woe, want and murder o'er a land!
Even in the peaceful rural vale,
Truth weeping, tells the mournful tale
How pampered Luxury, Flattery by her side,
The parasite empoisoning her ear,
With all the servile wretches in the rear,
Looks o'er the proud property, extended wide;
And eyes *the simple rustic hind*
Whose toil upholds the glittering show—
A creature of another kind,
Some coarser substance unrefined—
Placed for her lordly use thus far, thus vile below!"

If you substitute for "the simple rustic hind" "the African slave" you can probably sense how Burns fed the innate resentment of young Lincoln against those in America who used the toil of the slave to uphold their "glittering show."

And in the same poem while asking those who "slept in beds of down" to remember the unfortunate who hungry:

"Stretched on his straw he lays himself to sleep
While thro' the ragged roof and chinky wall
Chill o'er his slumbers piles the drift deep"

and also advising them that

"Affliction's sons are brothers in distress
A brother to relieve how exquisite the bliss,"

Burns probably came so close to some of Lincoln's own early experiences that his kinship with Burns became very real.

And certainly the closing verse of that powerful, but little known poem, stimulated in Lincoln the kind of religion which appealed strongly to him:

"But deep this truth impressed my mind
Thro' all his works abroad,
The heart benevolent and kind
The most resembles God."

(Carlyle said of this poem:

"It is worth seven homilies on mercy for it is the voice of mercy itself.")

The "Twa Dogs," for those to whom the Scottish dialect is no handicap, (as it apparently was not to Lincoln, if Milton Hay is to be believed) is one of the genuine masterpieces of Burns.

In that poem the contrast is made between the lot of the Cotter and tenant farmer and that of the gentry and landlord.

The description by Burns of the factor's action toward the "poor tenant bodies" would awaken and strengthen Lincoln's sympathy for the oppressed of another race.

"I've noticed on our Laird's court-day
An mony a time my heart's been wae
Poor tenant bodies, scant o'cash
How they maun thole a factor's snash
He'll stamp and threaten, curse and swear
He'll apprehend them, poind their gear
While they maun stand w' aspect humble
And hear it a' and fear and tremble."

Is there not something in this description which resembles the scenes at the slave block which aroused the sentiments which controlled Lincoln's life?

In trying to measure the influence of Burns on Lincoln, I think we should assume that he became familiar with Burns in the most impressionable period of his life, the years he lived in Indiana.

A great many biographers have said that Lincoln first became acquainted with Burns and Shakespeare in New Salem, but others have given us pretty clear proof that this could not be so. We know that the English and American readers, which he had in his youth, and Scott's Lessons, which it is agreed he read, contained much of the best of Shakespeare, and Brooks and Arnold should be accepted as good witnesses to his youthful familiarity with Burns.

J. Edward Murr, who contributed an article on "Lincoln in Indiana" to the Indiana Magazine of History, certainly had access to the very best original sources, as he resided for years in the region where Lincoln spent his boyhood. He knew many of Lincoln's boyhood friends and associates. He tells in the December 1917 volume, page 332, what he says might seem incredible, that:

"Repeated interviews were obtained with these pioneers, some of whom up to that time had never so much as been interviewed by a newspaper reporter, much less by any of the biographers of Mr. Lincoln."

His conclusion given on page 43 of the March, 1918, volume seems entitled to considerable respect.

"When Lincoln, a bearded man, walked down Sangamon river bottom, Illinois, for the first time, his character was already formed. He brought with him from Indiana his rare wit, humor, and inexhaustible fund of anecdotes. His school days were over. *It is true he took a post-graduate course in Shakespeare and Burns.*"

The conclusion of Mr. Murr as to the "post graduate" course which Lincoln took on Burns in New Salem, fits in better with the evidence of the deep influence Burns had on Lincoln, than the assumption that he never read Burns until after he was twenty-one.

The years in Indiana were the most impressionable years of Lincoln. They were the hungry years when he was eagerly seeking the intellectual sustenance which his active mentality craved.

This early reading of Burns' Poems and prose gave balance and poise to Lincoln's thinking—gave him that sympathy for and that understanding of the less fortunate of our species, which dominated his life, and, after death, his immortal fame.

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